Transcript: Denise Cotton

Save Your Oakland Stories

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IMAGES: Photo of Denise Cotton, provided by Denise Cotton

INTERVIEWER (Elena Botkin-Levy)
Today is October 14th, 2023. We are recording at the Oakland Main Library for Save Your Oakland Stories. I'm Elena Botkin-Levy from Gems, Oral Histories. And today I'm recording with Denise Cotton. So I'm going to have you introduce yourself. So your name, your age, when and where you were born to start.

DENISE COTTON
OK, Gotcha. So my name is Denise Cotton. Or when I was married, Denise Cotton Royal. Some people know me as. I was born at Stanford University Medical Center and… but I was raised in Oakland. I've lived here since December of 1979 when I was 8 years old. So I've been here for what, about 44 years? I'm 52 now.

INTERVIEWER
Amazing. And say a little bit about your relationship to Oakland.

DENISE COTTON
Well, I love Oakland. I think it's a beautiful place of a lot of different things, which I'll talk a little bit about today. And it's artistic... It's like a patchwork. It's like a quilt of artistic expression of, you know, all different types of thoughts, innovation. Yeah, it's it's a beautiful place. And the landscape is beautiful too. I love it here. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER
Do you want to share a little bit about what you have?

DENISE COTTON
Sure. So like I said, I wasn't born here. My dad is actually African-American. He's from Texas. And he came out here to, he got a full scholarship to attend Stanford University and study chemistry there. And he met my mother. She grew up just about two miles away from Stanford, so he met her. And she's Italian. So I'm half Black, half Italian.

And my dad, he came from a very rich history of education in the family, dating all the way back to slavery. My great-great-grandfather Oscar Mothershed was freed from slavery and he saved his money and bought just under 300 acres of land in Bloomberg, Texas. And he donated the first lot, the first parcel to build the first Black school in the area, and he built, donated another lot to build a church. And the rest of the lots he either kept, you know, for his family or he sold to other people who, you know, got just out of slavery to build homes for their families.

So, you know, my dad and his… Oscar Mothershed named… the whole point... he named that street College Avenue. So education was really important to him. He made sure that all his children and grandchildren got an education. My great aunts and uncles in the South who grew up in like the 1930s had master's degrees and PhDs and which is a huge accomplishment back then. I think less than 5% of the nation had even a college degree at that time. So my dad's first cousin was part of the Little Rock 9,

the first students, you know, to integrate schools in the United States. And so he came out here to study chemistry at Stanford University and met my mom, who was Italian. But he had to leave because she left the family when I was four years old. And he became a single parent father, which was rare for Black men at that time in that area to be a single parent. So, you know, he had to. He encountered a lot of racism, a lot of opposition. He couldn't get an apartment, a place to live. So he moved us back to Texas for a while with our family there. And from Texas he missed California so much, so he came to Oakland. And that's how we migrated here and landed in Oakland, my sister and I.

INTERVIEWER
And when was that?

DENISE COTTON
That was in December of 1979, when I was in the third grade. The first thing I noticed as an 8 year old when I moved to Oakland: the strong families, I noticed there were very strong family affiliations. Activism. I saw "Free Huey," you know, spray painted on walls. And I asked my dad, I said, who is Huey Newton? I knew nothing about… they didn't teach that in school. I had no idea. But it was everywhere, all over Oakland. And I think that was my first introduction to the activism out here and how people, you know, there's just a spirit of really desiring justice out here. And my dad explained to me who the Black Panthers were and it was always, it was interesting to me how there was what really happened and then a lot of other people's perception of it. You know, Black Panthers were here to give, you know, hot breakfasts to kids who couldn't afford it. They were here to make sure, you know, kids got to school and that they got an education and that, you know, people weren't being bullied by the police and really to defend the community and support the community and advocate for the community. But somehow, you know, media and some popular opinion sort of twisted that into seeing them as bullies or violent people, which they that's not what it was about at all. So. So I always found that very interesting.

And, you know, so my dad, you know, we couldn't afford to live. You know, we were actually homeless. We lived in his Volkswagen van for a while until he found work. And you know, he wanted to make sure we got to get an education because of course, education was so important to him. So he connected with the Catholic school system and put us in the Catholic schools. And you know, I found the Catholic school system in Oakland at the time to be just a tremendous, a wonderful network of communities that promoted values and provided resources. They gave us, when we got our first apartment, they gave us beds. They gave my dad a set of golf clubs. You know, I mean they were just… they were just a support system and in a very beautiful way because the people that I went to school with, whether it was elementary school, at Saint Patrick's in West Oakland, high school Holy Names High School, or I even actually went to Saint Mary's College. I went to Catholic schools all the way. But particularly the schools in Oakland - Holy Names and Saint Patrick's - we have such a tight network, you know, a connection, a camaraderie among the people. And you know, to this very day, all those of us who went to Holy Names High School, we knew the people in our brother's school, St. Mary's High School. We knew each other. We had relationships. So we, you know, we have relationships with them to this very day. They're our brothers, you know, we're their sisters. And there was… and it wasn't just limited to Holy Names and our brothers' school. It was Saint Joseph's, it was Saint Elizabeth, it was Bishop O'Dowd. It was a whole

network. So that was a very beautiful thing, the sort of, you know, just enriched what my father already you know, he valued education so much. And it was to have that as a network and a support system would just fully, it just totally enriched what it is that he already wanted to create for us, which was a, you know, way for us to to get a good education.

I think it's sad that the attendance in Catholic schools today has dwindled so much. And I think part of it is because millennials are moving away from religious affiliations. But I kind of feel like that's throwing the baby out with the bathwater because you know, I… you don't have… I was, I was not Catholic when I started in Catholic school. I was actually baptized Baptist with my family in Texas. I call myself a religious mutt actually, because I also lived with my family in Michigan for a while and they were Muslims. So. But it's not about religious affiliation, It's just about a community… a values based community, character development, and sharing resources.

So like I said, I've been here in Oakland for about 44 years, aside from my time living in LA when I got out of college and went and moved to LA for a few years. And I've learned some really important wisdoms about courage, love, equity and community, which inspired me to write a book called *The Virus: A Story of Love, Life and Social Anarchy through a Controversial Pandemic*. And if you know me, you know, I'm all about courage and love. You know, I just, that's what I strive to amplify in this world. So I'd like to read you a little bit from that book that is actually something that I wrote describing Oakland.

There's a spirit in Oakland, the city I call home. Currently occupied by nearly half a million people and referenced as one of the most diverse cities in the world. Oakland is filled with harrowing expressions of art, strong voices, liquor stores, posh dining, social enterprise, team pride, turf pride, Victorian and early mid-century architecture, graffiti, day parties, poverty, wealth, and sunshine. Oakland is an enthusiastic purveyor of social justice and a colorful cocktail of hope, rage, turmoil, culture, and innovation. It lives at the forefront of activism and thrives on revolution. Oakland has such a distinct spirit that even though it's a city, we call it "The Town." Those who have migrated here brandish Oakland themed clothing proclaiming "I found my soul in Oakland." And those who grew up here are imbued with an unforgettable identity. Clint Eastwood, Tom Hanks, Kamala Harris, Bruce Lee, Barbara Lee, Sheila E., Huey Newton, Marshawn Lynch, Ryan Coogler, Too Short, Tupac, and MC Hammer. Just a few of the well known trendsetters and barrier breakers who've called Oakland their home in recent history. But before it was incorporated as a city in the mid 1800s, Oakland was home to the Ohlone tribe of Native Americans. References indicate approximately 300,000 lived throughout California for somewhere between 12,000 to 20,000 years before the Spanish colonizers came. From what we know, the Ohlone people were hunters, skilled basket makers, and dancers who wore elaborate costumes. They were deeply spiritual people. Dance was a prayer for food, good health, and harmony. Their lifestyle was centered on reverence for nature, spirituality, family and community.

I could talk about poverty, the beautiful terrain in Oakland, the vibrant spirit of activism here, or distinct communities and resources such as the Catholic school system. But my story is about the cross cultural experience of being biracial and about courage, the courage to love, like I said, the courage to reach across vast differences.

That's actually part of what I do for a living. I'm a partner in a company called Courageous Leadership.

So I'd like to talk a little bit about the Native Americans who were the original Oakland natives, because I I think it's important to do that, to acknowledge our history. And I think it would be irreverent not to do so. One thing that I've studied about the Native Americans that I absolutely love and I talk about all the time is the 7th generation principle. And I don't know if you've heard of it or not, but it's… it basically means that what we do has an effect that'll last seven generations. And I think we're not quite 7 generations removed from the Native Americans being here. So I wonder what they've done that still is amplified in our community today. And I wonder what it was about who they were and how they lived that created such a spirit of activism in Oakland.

Yeah. When I was five years old, kids used to play and jokingly perform what we called an Indian rain dance to see if we can make it rain outside. We had no idea what we're doing, that we're, you know, just playfully imitating, practically mocking something that was once real, prominent and profound and even sacred to a group of people whose ancestors were buried beneath the tetherball pole where I played, the hopscotch grid. You know, the playground.

Certainly the naivete of children is no crime. Neither is the inevitability of change. But knowing that approximately 300,000 people who demonstrated a peaceful and productive model of an independent society, rather an interdependent society, that's an important distinction, were uprooted from the soil where they buried their ancestors and laid their prayers for thousands of years makes me wonder what's remained.

So. Yeah, I mean, I I think maybe the Ohlone people are the essence of the soul of Oakland that emerges as harrowing expressions of art, strong voices, team and turf pride, and howling cries for equity, that bounce off the ceilings of time and ricochet into the halls of lineage in in search of justice. I think that there's, you know, definitely a connection there and I think it's interesting to look at that. So.

INTERVIEWER
Thank you for sharing. Yeah, thank you. It's fun hearing that specific memory of doing what you're calling this rain dance and tetherball. And I wonder if you think back to that time kind of what did it… what did the environment look like that was around you at that time?

DENISE COTTON
Yeah. What did it look like? It looked very different than it does now. You know, like I said, we grew up very poor and we lived in this apartment building. And right in the apartment below us there was a pimp that lived there. And I had no idea what pimps and prostitutes were, but we had to walk just a couple of blocks, two blocks down to San Pablo every morning to catch the bus to school because my dad left, like, at 5:00 AM to go to work. And I remember looking at all of the prostitutes on San Pablo saying, wow, those women sure wear a lot of makeup. They sure know a lot of people. I had no idea. And, you know, I was so incredibly naive and it's just funny to laugh at now. But yeah, yeah, it… Oakland looked very

different then than it does now, very different. But it's always been a beautiful place to me, and it's still a beautiful place.

INTERVIEWER
What bus would you catch?

DENISE COTTON
Oh God, I don't remember what bus it was. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER
What do you… what other changes in the city that you have noticed? In your 44 years here are things that you've observed in terms of a changing city?

DENISE COTTON
Yeah I think there's… we've gotten more industry here with a lot of companies have moved here and I think that partners well with the fact that we've always had sort of a spirit of innovation in the city and or in Oakland I should say. And but I think the innovation that we've had was more social innovation and that kind of transferred over to innovation in the field of business. Yeah, I mean I think it was political innovation, a spirit of political innovation before and and now it's it's you know moved over into business

INTERVIEWER
And say more about your company.

DENISE COTTON
Courageous Leadership. So a friend of mine, Brooke Deterline, we met years ago working with a world renowned psychologist named Philip Zimbardo, helping him just, you know, start a nonprofit organization. And so she decided to do a spin off and called it Courageous Leadership and asked me to be her partner. And we go into corporations, nonprofit organizations, small businesses, large businesses, and government entities. We've been recruited by Australia, the Australian government, to do some work with them. And we basically teach people, whether it's individuals, teams and work groups, you know, boards of directors or C-Suite executives, to stand up and act in alignment with their values when it's hard to do so, when we're under pressure and social influences unwittingly affect our behavior and and cause us to act out of alignment with our values.

INTERVIEWER
Important work.

DENISE COTTON
Yeah. Thank you. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder just before we wrap if you have hopes for the future of the city and how you think about yourself in the city moving forward?

DENISE COTTON
Oh, that's interesting… hopes for the future. Well, you know, when I look at Oakland, I think that it's something that's, oh, it's kept me here and that's, that's forefront at my mind is that whatever we see in terms of violence or crime is, and this is true anywhere, but it's very evident in Oakland. But it's indicative of an imbalance in our society. What are we not doing collectively that's cultivating this, or allowing it, or spawning it in some way? But I think it's evident in Oakland because there's also, paralleling with that, there's also so much activism. And so I think my hope for the future of Oakland is that there's more people with a mindset of cultural anthropology who really look at that and pick it apart and say what's going on in terms of our social ills in the city. And, you know, what are we not doing in terms of equity? What are we not doing in terms of being courageous, loving each other courageously and compassionately as a community? And how can we, you know, apply innovation to fix those social ails? And like I said, that's true anywhere. But it's just easier to see in Oakland because you have, you know, alongside the crime, you also have the activism. So it's kind of, you know, it's a little bit more in your face.

INTERVIEWER
Yeah. I think lastly, I know you've really focused on this relationship of the Catholic parochial schools in Oakland and really talked about the the connection or the Catholic schools. Why is that unique to Oakland or what's particular about that here in Oakland would you say?

DENISE COTTON
I can't say that it's unique to Oakland. I don't. I mean, I haven't been. I don't. I don't know the Catholic school communities in other places. I know that it was something that was, it was a spirit of service to the community that was deeply needed in our community and still is. And I think that's, you know why it's a central theme for me.

INTERVIEWER
I think you mentioned the Catholic school brought you to Disneyland.

DENISE COTTON
Yes, yes. My 4th grade teacher, she was a, she was a nun, Sister Frances. And she knew my sister and I had never gone to Disneyland so she took us one year. Or the two of them, Sister Pat and Sister Frances from Saint Patrick's Elementary School in West Oakland.

INTERVIEWER
Do you have any other favorite memories from Saint Pat's?

DENISE COTTON

Oh, yes. Actually. Who doesn't have a good elementary school memory? So when I was a kid there, that's when rap music just came out. I'm dating myself terribly. But yeah, rap music just came out and it was such a… it was such a big thing. And, you know, it was, it was just an exciting time for all the kids in our school. And, you know, it's just how everyone just embraced it and it just made it fun, made a fun environment.

INTERVIEWER
Could you listen to music at school?

DENISE COTTON
Well, I mean on the bus on our way to school or, you know, walking, but no, not at school. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER
Is there a particular song you remember?

DENISE COTTON
Sugar Hill Gang. I don't remember the names of songs. I remember that we had a talent show and I had to dance in front of the whole school. And I did a dance called The Cowboy, and I wore my dad's Stetson hat, 'cause he's from Texas. There was lots of great music in those days, though, and lots of it.

INTERVIEWER
Do you remember what your dance looked like?

DENISE COTTON
I don't, no. And if I did, I wouldn't tell you. So

INTERVIEWER
That's great. Well, this is such a short snapshot of your life and your story in Oakland. But does it feel like anything is missing from our conversation today or anything that you want to make sure to capture in this moment?

DENISE COTTON
Yeah. I just want to say, you know, that there's such a great artistic expression in Oakland. I think I did kind of say that, but it's, it's huge right now. And I'd like to see that to continue to thrive. And I'd like to see that, you know, it seems as if the wealth gap is widening and that makes me very sad. So I'd like to see, you know, more opportunity and striving toward equity.

INTERVIEWER
Well, thank you for sharing your story.

DENISE COTTON
Yeah. Thank you for having me.